FORUM FORUM FORUM

ON SCHOOL BOARD DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE

Québec

FORUM

ON SCHOOL BOARD DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE

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INTRODUCTION

The Forum on School Board Democracy and Governance is part of the consultation process undertaken by the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports in January and February 2008. The 1998 reform of the education system resulted in school board mergers and the decentralization of powers toward schools and school boards. Ten years later, stakeholders are taking stock of school board governance and exploring means of improving school board functioning and performance.

In 2003, participation in school board elections plummeted from more than 15% to approximately 8%, raising serious questions about the state of school board democracy in Québec. In the spring of 2006, the Table Québec-commissions scolaires was set up to review the question of school board democracy.

Faced with the disappointing results at the 2007 school board elections and the debate they sparked among the general public and in the National Assembly, the government decided to take a closer look at different aspects of school board democracy and functioning.

First, the government asked the Minister to hold a series of discussions on four major themes:

- the educational, social, cultural and economic role of school boards in the region
- school board democracy and the promotion of participation in school board elections
- transparent and rigorous school board administration and results-based accountability
- school board funding and school taxation

Nearly thirty meetings were held with representatives of all stakeholders in the public school system, as well as several socioeconomic partners.[1] Each one was an opportunity for participants to present their point of view, their comments and their suggestions to the Minister and to engage in frank and open discussion.

1. The list of participants appears in Appendix 1.

The government believes that public discussion is an important aspect of this round of consultations. The Forum will give participants the opportunity to share their opinions and examine their respective positions in order to identify common ground with a view to establishing what direction the process begun in January 2008 should take.

Based on the content of the meetings with the Minister and the reports tabled, the following text is a synthesis of participants' thoughts on each theme. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive list of all the opinions stated. Rather, it is to give participants an overview of the positions expressed with a view to introducing avenues for discussion during the Forum.

THE EDUCATIONAL, SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC ROLE OF SCHOOL BOARDS IN THE REGION

According to the Education Act, school boards are responsible for organizing educational services in their territory. These services, set by the government, concern preschool, elementary and secondary education as well as vocational training and adult general education. They include important social, cultural and economic dimensions. School boards form partnerships with different organizations in the region in order to share expertise and resources with a view to improving educational services.

As administrators of specialized services and equipment, school boards are called upon to reach agreements with different local and regional players, especially municipalities, in order to make sure that the public has easy access to a wide range of public resources.

1.1 THE EDUCATIONAL ROLE OF SCHOOL BOARDS

There is a considerably wide consensus on the importance of the role of school boards in the organization of educational services in their territory. The presence of regional political and administrative authorities fosters the equitable distribution of educational services and the resources needed to dispense them, given the diversity of situations in the territory. Especially in resource regions and in the English sector, school boards provide support and guidance services that individual institutions could not on their own. They are leaders in the implementation of the Québec educational project and indispensable interface between the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport and their schools.

Some participants, however, think there should be a better balance in order to foster the participation of parents in school governance. Parents believe that many of the 1998 reforms remain to be fully implemented, in particular as concerns support for parent participation on the governing boards.

While the educational role of school boards is recognized for the most part as positive, the scope and definition of this role, as well as school board-governing board relations, are the subject of complementary and even divergent opinions.

In addition to the educational role of school boards, there is the broadening of their sphere of activity in the community. This can be explained in part by the integrative function of schools in society. Because they socialize students, Québec schools are a focal point for citizenship and community life. They are an ideal setting for social, cultural and economic programs, such as the Action Plan to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion, the promotion of healthy lifestyle habits and the Culture in the Schools program.

Expectations in the economic sector are equally high. Industry and unions agree on the important role school boards play in training specialized workers and retraining workers in declining sectors. They believe that the education system is a key player in regional economic development, especially in the context of a growing knowledge economy and an increasingly integrated world economy. It has been pointed out that the mergers gave school boards the ability to act more effectively at the regional level, in greater synergy with regional partners. This being said, school boards appear to have little control over the establishment of training programs to meet job market needs, a responsibility which essentially falls to the Ministère.

Schools have become essential social, cultural and economic players in the community, while school boards play a similar role at the regional level. Especially in certain regional and linguistic contexts, schools and school boards are vehicles for development in areas that go far beyond their basic educational function. This relationship between schools and the community goes both ways: cooperation with the community is extremely valuable in implementing regional educational projects such as the fight to keep students in school.

All participants recognize the complementary nature of school boards' primary mission and the social, cultural and economic functions they have taken on over time. However, many of them are uncomfortable with the growing complexity and multiplication of school boards' mandates and the resources to which they have access.

Finally, most of the groups consulted mentioned poor communication between school boards, their partners and the general public, resulting in a failure to understand the role played by school boards and its importance or relevance. This affects the credibility of the structure and, by extension, its actions.

1.2 JOINT ACTIONS

For educational and socioeconomic participants, school boards play different roles depending on the geographic, demographic, cultural or linguistic context. Analysis of the different aspects of these roles must take into account the reality of rural areas, the regions and the English-speaking community.

Many people recognize school boards' central role in both urban and rural areas. Faced with rapid changes in the social, cultural and economic characteristics of the communities they serve, school boards must adapt their educational services to the heterogeneous nature of the school population. In this context, harmonizing school board activities with activities organized by the municipalities and communities is essential. For example, school boards negotiate agreements with communities to facilitate the sharing of facilities and infrastructures. These agreements have made it possible to keep schools open in small communities and to implement social, cultural and economic projects that breathe new life into communities throughout the territory.

School boards are regional public institutions with a critical mass of human and financial resources that enable them not only to carry out their primary mandate, but also to take on other social, cultural and economic responsibilities, one way in which they contribute to the regional economy. This gives them considerable economic power, since they are among the principal employers in the region and contribute to economic stability. The demographic context of the English-speaking community is characterized by a high concentration in the Greater Montréal area and a lower density in most of the other regions of Québec. As a result, several English school boards serve a territory made up of two or more regions. They are therefore the only organizations to provide academic and cultural services in several regions of Québec, which makes it possible to maintain English-speaking communities.

English-speaking communities have strong ties to their school boards, the only public institutions whose directors are elected exclusively by members of these communities. Schools are also where much of community life takes place. Community school projects reveal the importance of this aspect, which transcends a strictly educational mission.

Generally speaking, school boards are important players in the socioeconomic development of their regions, as can be seen by their role in joint bodies such as the regional interlevel education committees or the regional labour market boards. Similarly, they also partner with those involved in youth issues, such as efforts to keep students in school, to convince young people to stay in the regions and to support students in disadvantaged communities. The social involvement of schools, their association with community, cultural and athletic partners, and the organization of regional events contribute to regional sociocultural development.

Schools' principal partners at the local level, municipalities are of the opinion that school boards should collaborate in overall community development. They believe that schools provide basic services and should have more power to adapt their interventions to the needs of the community.

According to the municipalities, school boards should continue to establish a global vision of the role of the education sector on the regional stage and to coordinate interventions at this level. Their contribution to the development of strategic plans and MRC development plans is significant. However, the fact that school board territories do not coincide with those of the municipalities and MRCs is a problem.

School boards and municipalities form partnerships for the joint use of equipment and services. However, relations between municipalities, school boards and schools require the contribution of various players at different levels, which does not make local joint projects easy. Also, all too often, partners enter into these collaborative projects with a rigid attitude, refusing to adapt their ways of functioning and administrative rules. This lack of flexibility hinders the efficient use of equipment and services that are entirely publicly funded.

1.3 SCOPE OF THE SCHOOL BOARDS' MANDATE

The vast majority of those consulted believe that the school boards' role should be clearly set out in the Education Act, but they differ on how to do so. Several school boards propose defining their own mission and revising it on a regular basis. Ideally, the objective should be to officially establish the scope of school boards' power in spheres of activity that complement their primary mandate. Partnerships with the community should be based on a clearer sharing of responsibility with a view to achieving common objectives, as well as on a better definition of the accountability of each partner. School boards would then be able to carry out their various missions more efficiently.

Increased participation on the part of school boards in the sociocultural and community sectors raises some concerns. Some participants fear that certain partners might no longer assume their responsibilities, which would adversely affect the educational mission.

1.4 AVENUES FOR DISCUSSION

Consultations on this theme revealed three major questions concerning the role of school boards in their region. The first involves the balance between schools' educational mission and their social, cultural and economic mandates. The second involves the need for a better legislative framework for the mandate given to school boards, the exercise of their direct and complementary responsibilities, and their relationship with the Ministère, the schools and the community. Finally, the third question addresses the improvement of mechanisms for collaboration with a view to ensuring the transparency and cooperative nature of the school system's involvement in every aspect of regional development.

In addition to education, what other missions should school boards be given in order to improve their contribution to the social, cultural and economic development of their territories and regions? Should there be a better balance between their primary mission and their growing and increasingly complex complementary missions?

What types of harmonization or mechanisms for collaboration should be promoted between school boards and the community in order to foster the achievement of these mandates?

How can relations between the Ministère, the school boards and the governing boards be improved?

THEME 2

SCHOOL BOARD DEMOCRACY AND THE PROMOTION OF PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS

Democratic participation is a fundamental characteristic of the Québec school system. Since the implementation of universal suffrage in school board elections in 1971, several amendments have been made to the system in order to accentuate its democratic nature, in particular greater participation of parents in school boards and schools.

Since 1990, the rate of participation in school board elections has continued to decline. This phenomenon merits reflection, especially since it is inconsistent with many participants' open interest in the development of the Québec education system, the academic success of our young people, and social and economic development. In every community, it raises questions as to its causes and means of reviving public interest in school board governance.

2.1 PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS

The rate of participation in the November 4, 2007, school board elections hit a historical low of 7.75% (7.12% for French school boards and 16.87% for English school boards.[2] In comparison, the overall rate of participation was 19.9% in 1990, 15.4% in 1998 and 8.4% in 2003. More than two thirds of school commissioners in office were elected by acclamation. The rate of participation in English school boards increased by 20% between 2003 and 2007; the number of elections increased by 25% over the same period. An analysis of results also reveals a much higher rate of participation in resource regions.

Several participants tried to contextualize participation in school board elections by citing the relatively recent development of the current system (which is about ten years old). According to others, it is part of a societal shift characterized by decreased participation in elections. Yet others see in this trend an indicator of public dissatisfaction with school boards and school commissioners. Finally, some blame the absence of major issues for debate.

The vast majority of participants, however, recognize that there is a problem and proposed concrete solutions for promoting the importance of school board governance in democratic life and fostering the participation of parents and the community.

2. Appendixes 2 and 3 give the results of the November 4, 2007, elections.

In this situation, school board representatives blame the current legislative framework, which fails to value their work. Other participants in the school system believe that the institution of governing boards is directly responsible for a fifty per cent drop in the rate of participation in school board elections. In their opinion, the democratic process within the governing boards has an impact on parents' participation in school board elections.

Many participants believe that increasing the powers of commissioners would have an effect on public interest in school board activities and participation in their democratic bodies. More specifically, many school boards suggest giving commissioners more decision-making power in areas with a direct impact on school board governance. Greater administrative autonomy would give commissioners more power to define orientations and establish administrative priorities.

Many participants would like to see commissioners play a greater political role. As representatives of their districts on the governing boards, commissioners could represent their community's needs and expectations. Similarly, they could promote education in all its forms and stimulate public interest in the major issues involved in its development.

To this end, commissioners could also play a more dynamic leadership role in collaborative efforts and in the establishment of partnerships with other participants in the community. Many people believe that they should be responsible for maintaining close and constructive ties with governing board chairs in order to ensure greater consistency between the actions of school boards and those of the schools in their territory. Finally, well aware of the needs and objectives of the school teams in their community, commissioners could help identify potential partners and reach agreements for cooperation aimed at promoting every aspect of success in school.

According to this vision, more power for commissioners could raise public interest in school board governance. Some participants mentioned that councils of commissioners are often viewed as bodies that ratify or endorse decisions made by school board administrators, which affects their credibility as decision-making bodies. Similarly, some participants believe that the public would become actively involved in the democratic process if it thought it had real power to appoint and influence commissioners who actually had a say in school board governance.

Finally, many participants expressed a desire that the Education Act provide a better definition of the roles and functions of the councils of commissioners.

2.3 SELECTION OF COMMISSIONERS

The drop in participation in school board elections led many participants to raise questions as to how commissioners are selected.

Right now there are two methods of selecting representatives: universal suffrage for the councils of commissioners, and the appointment of parent and teacher representatives to governing boards at meetings called for that purpose.

Participants suggested four different methods during the consultations. Some, including the school boards, proposed maintaining universal suffrage for the election of commissioners. However, their role should be better defined and their functions expanded by giving them more leeway in the implementation of policies. Finally, some participants emphasized the importance of improving collaboration between elected commissioners and governing board chairs.

Others suggested forming mixed boards made up of commissioners elected by universal suffrage and a substantial number of parents appointed by the school board's parents' committee. The relative weight of commissioners with respect to parents should be based on the objectives of representativeness set following the adoption of this format. In these participants' opinion, parents should participate in school board governance. However, this format raises certain difficulties concerning the sharing of powers and double representation on the council of commissioners of citizens in districts inhabited by elected commissioners and parent representatives.

Some participants suggested forming electoral colleges made up of parents on the governing boards. These electoral colleges would be responsible for collecting nominations for the different positions and selecting commissioners. These participants believe that this would result in the selection of commissioners who are directly concerned by what is going on at the school. However, others believe that it would reduce the involvement of the local community, which should be concerned about the issues at stake and the choices to be made with respect to education and work force development.

Finally, some participants proposed a method of selecting commissioners comparable to the one used in the health and social services sector. In this format, the government would select commissioners based on lists of nominations submitted by one or more electoral colleges. It would have the advantage of fostering the participation of the different socioeconomic partners interested in education and more direct communication between the Ministère and the school boards. However, its raises the question of accountability with respect to the collection of school taxes.

These four methods all have advantages and disadvantages requiring in-depth analysis. To varying degrees, each one could help increase participation in school board elections. However, most participants recommend amending the democratic process through the implementation of different measures to foster involvement in democratic life.

2.4 COMPLEMENTARY MEASURES

Several school boards proposed increasing commissioners' salaries in order to reflect their degree of participation and the availability required of them. This measure could encourage more people to run for election. Other solutions were proposed to stimulate participation in school board elections, such as holding municipal and school board elections on the same day, holding school board elections in the spring, electing the chairs of the council of commissioners by universal suffrage and forming political parties.

Many participants proposed reducing the number of electoral districts. This measure would make it possible to extend commissioners' responsibility to the representation of the different groups concerned by school board activities. It would also result in the concentration of decision-making powers among a small number of people, giving them greater authority in the organization.

Many participants, however, pointed out that the number of commissioners could not be uniformly reduced in every school board. Depending on the particular situation, there would have to be enough commissioners in rural and English school boards that serve several regions, so that the population of these large areas is represented fairly.

A popular proposal involves greater recourse to information technologies, in particular electronic voting and computerization of the electoral process where possible.

Finally, all participants agreed that the new initiatives taken in 2007 to inform electors were a step in the right direction. However, many of them thought that these actions were insufficient and that they appeared to have little impact on participation in school board elections. They would have liked the Directeur général des élections to make a greater effort to fully implement what they believe to be the spirit of the law. Representatives of the English school boards pointed out serious failings in the electoral registration process and the updating of electoral lists.

2.5 HARMONIZATION OF COUNCILS OF COMMISSIONERS AND GOVERNING BOARDS

Many participants pointed out a lack of harmony between the councils of commissioners and the governing boards. These two levels of governance appear to mistrust each other, while the spirit of the 1998 amendments called for cooperation and collaboration. In this respect, there has been a better integration of activities in English school boards, but much remains to be done. Parents are particularly concerned about the absence of effective partnerships between councils of commissioners and the governing boards.

The Commission scolaire de Montréal is field-testing neighbourhood committees made up of governing board chairs, school principals, system directors and the district commissioner. The mission of these 19 committees is to implement school board policies and measures throughout the territory. To this end, committees can join forces with partners in their community. This approach opens up interesting avenues since it fosters cooperation and partnership between the school board, the governing boards and the community, while promoting the contribution of commissioners.

Several participants expressed a desire that commissioners participate in governing board meetings, with or without the right to vote. Conversely, the participation of governing boards in school board committees and subcommittees would help develop a better culture of collaboration. Parent representatives are still awaiting recognition of the strategic role they should be able to play on the council of commissioners.

2.6 COMMUNICATIONS BY SCHOOL AUTHORITIES

The problem of communication between school boards and the communities they serve hinders school board democracy. Since the public is unaware of the role and activities of the councils of commissioners, it has little interest in school board governance.

However, many participants, including several school boards, believe that the means used to communicate with parents and the general public are ineffective. They blame this situation on a popular perception in the school system that devoting resources to communication and information detracts from student services. School board directors are therefore hesitant to invest in effective communication strategies.

Many participants also pointed out that improved communication would result in more candidates to commissioner positions, particularly among governing board members. They therefore propose that the Ministère undertake and support widespread promotional activities in partnership with the school boards to raise awareness of the role and activities of school boards. Many English school boards suggested that broadcasting council of commissioners meetings, like municipal council meetings, on community television would be a good way of raising awareness among electors.

2.7 AVENUES FOR DISCUSSION

Adapting governance mechanisms to the reality of Québec society appears to be a good way of revitalizing school board democracy. Poor understanding of the functions of school boards and commissioners fuels the public's lack of interest. Important failings with respect to the quality of communications between school boards, governing boards and the general public hinder effective and transparent school board governance.

How should commissioners be selected? Why?

Should there be structural changes or adjustments to electoral procedures such as the election of the chair by universal suffrage, simultaneous school board and municipal elections, etc.?

Should there be fewer commissioners? How would that work? Would an approach involving the establishment of the number of commissioners based on certain school board characteristics be acceptable?

How should the relationship between the councils of commissioners and the governing boards be developed in order to establish better partnerships for governance on a territorial basis?

TRANSPARENT AND RIGOROUS SCHOOL BOARD ADMINISTRATION AND RESULTS-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY

Québec citizens are becoming increasingly demanding of their democratic institutions, including school boards. They want to know what their objectives are and what results they have achieved so that they can assess the achievement of their objectives in the accomplishment of their mission. They also want to know that public funds are being used responsibly.

Most of the participants agree that school boards carry out their responsibilities in their territory, especially as concerns the distribution of resources among schools and the implementation of policies, orientations and programs. Nevertheless, some participants are demanding that school boards show more flexibility by adapting their programs and actions to local needs.

3.1 SCHOOL BOARD STRATEGIC PLANNING

Strategic planning is key to the governance of each school board. Based on a situational analysis taking local and regional situations into account, it makes it possible to identify the educational and organizational issues of concern to the school board and its schools. It provides important strategic data needed to develop success plans. It also provides for the establishment of principles and orientations that will guide the school board in the development and implementation of its annual plan of action. It is also a communication tool for raising awareness among the school board's partners of challenges it wishes to undertake and fostering the establishment of effective partnerships. Finally, it provides a frame of reference for structuring the school board's accountability.

Some participants believe, however, that school boards must strike a sometimes delicate balance between a fair and equitable organization of services in their territory and a response to particular local needs and, oftentimes, the individual needs of students. They often refer, for example, to the various problems encountered by schools serving disadvantaged communities, exceptionally diverse cultural communities or communities comprising a large number of students requiring specialized services.

In this respect, there is a lack of harmony between school board plans and their schools' success plans. It appears that greater cooperation between schools and their school board would foster consistency of action and the effective implementation of services. Several participants expressed a desire to see school boards become more flexible, take

into account the particular characteristics of the different communities in their activities and rapidly meet local and regional needs, while maintaining the ability to implement a full range of services throughout their territory.

School principals believe that school board strategic plans are far too often a bureaucratic exercise that does not sufficiently take the local situation into account and that results in interventions too far removed from the needs of the community. They also pointed out that the uniformity of measures considerably hinders schools' mobilization by limiting their ability to act in order to achieve their objectives.

According to the Education Act, the school's educational mission is clear. School principals believe that the governing boards and school teams have all the knowledge and expertise they need to develop educational projects with an explicit vision of the future and success plans that meet students' needs. These success plans can provide guidelines for joint school-community actions and constitute the foundation for significant accountability. In this context, school principals believe that school boards should limit their plans to the organization of services and support for schools.

3.2 SCHOOL BOARD ADMINISTRATION

Many participants believe that most school board administrations are too cumbersome and bureaucratic and that too many complex administrative procedures are responsible for sluggish reactions and the use of considerable resources at the expense of student services.

The preoccupation with administrative issues is attributed in part to the school boards' position between the Ministère and the schools in their territory. In fact, school boards occupy a central position and are in direct contact not only with the Ministère and their schools, but with the different partners involved to varying degrees in carrying out the educational mission. They collaborate with partners such as municipalities, colleges and universities in the region, and agencies in the health, social services, employment and workforce development sectors.

In this complex and ever-changing context, school boards are responsible for the cohesion of the system by ensuring effective communication between the Ministère and their schools with respect to the implementation of policies and ministry programs. At the same time, they must be aware of the activities going on so that they can inform the Ministère of the different services available in their territory. They must also be familiar with the dynamics of their region in order to be able to situate the issues related to education and success in school among the principal development concerns.

As intermediaries, school boards multiply communications and administrative actions in order to deal with the different parties. For some, their bureaucratic procedures demonstrate a tendency to look at their mandate from a financial and administrative

point of view that may mask the important issues related to the achievement of educational results.

Many participants said they hoped school boards would play a more unifying role in the major educational aims such as success in school, student retention and adaptation of the work force to job market realities. Some hope that school boards will manage their resources in such a way as to contribute to joint achievements of benefit to students.

School principals believe that the school boards are too far removed from the needs of students in the different communities. The uniformity of their measures leaves no room for the adaptation of interventions to the particular characteristics of students in different communities. School principals therefore believe that they should focus on the organization of services, support for schools and the coordination of regional actions. They also believe that the schools should be responsible for implementing the Québec Education Program, policies and regulatory frameworks and, consequently, for receiving the necessary resources and support directly from the Ministère. The schools should also have the necessary autonomy to play a role in the community and establish partnership ties.

3.3 ACCOUNTABILITY

Some participants believe that the decentralization of power toward the school boards and schools has not had the expected results in terms of full, transparent and accessible accountability. In the spirit of effective communication, accountability should be the preferred means of providing information about orientations, actions, results, progress and challenges. It is also an excellent means of demonstrating the responsible use of public funding. In this respect, several participants pointed out that clear and full accountability is the best way of maintaining or even improving public confidence in school boards and their schools.

Education is a public good of interest to every member of society. School boards are publicly funded, through the Ministère's budgets and school taxes. In this context, they are accountable to the different segments of the population. For example, parents want to know whether their children are receiving a comprehensive and stimulating education and all the services to which they are entitled. The general public is especially interested in the quality of services, including the student retention rate, the average level of schooling and the integration of graduates into the job market.

The Ministère has access to administrative information from the school boards. It must also be informed of the level of implementation of its policies and programs in the territory.

Members of the National Assembly want to know how the school boards fulfilled their legal obligations in terms of the organization of services, for example, services for students with handicaps or learning or adjustment difficulties, school transportation,

the availability of teaching materials, professional development or a full range of complementary services.

Many participants believe that the necessary information fails to reach the general public and educators. Several school boards recognize that they do not use all available means to adequately inform parents, partners or the general public.

School boards should therefore use the appropriate means to provide each group concerned with clear and accessible information in a form that facilitates communication. In this respect, the school boards use different means of making their activities and results known. The annual report is the principal means used. Other means of communication are used during the school year to inform parents and the general public of special activities and notable achievements. In general, however, the format and content of the school boards' documents in the area of accountability vary because they are not based on specific expected outcomes or on uniform performance indicators.

Many participants believe that the information provided by school boards is not always clear. Financial information in particular is presented in a complicated manner and it is difficult to determine exactly how much was really allocated to each service. This is blamed on the school boards' right to move amounts from one budgetary item to another: this practice does not make it any easier to understand the composition of the different envelopes.

Many participants believe that the Ministère should not limit itself to the financial and administrative control of school boards. They think it should play a more important leadership role in order to broaden access to high-quality services, thereby stimulating success for all students. They want it to help establish target results and quantitative and qualitative management indicators. They also expect the Ministère to attentively monitor results and intervene in situations in which the results obtained differ significantly from expected results.

Some participants pointed out the importance of paying more attention to parents' expectations when preparing accountability reports. They want school board and school administrators to provide comprehensive and clear information about the budgets allocated to the schools to fund different activities. Parents also want to be informed about the results obtained in the implementation of educational projects and success plans.

3.4 COMPLAINT PROCESSING

One of the main indicators of satisfaction among parents and the general public with regard to services offered is the number of complaints received and processed. However, school boards rarely mention this aspect in their accountability reports. Many of them report that their complaint processing mechanisms are effective. However, they indicate that the procedure for filing complaints and the manner in which they are processed are

poorly understood, which causes parents to consult several people at the same time, in resulting ambiguous and frustrating situations.

Parents are unhappy with the many failures of the complaint processing mechanisms which, in their opinion, are a major symptom of failings in service offerings, communication with users, and the commissioners' accomplishment of their mandate as representatives of the public. Some participants wonder whether clear procedures for receiving and processing complaints and recourse to the councils of commissioners are established everywhere and whether parents are well informed.

Many participants observe that, where recourse to the councils of commissioners is possible, the procedure is cumbersome and complex. Parents feel that they do not have rapid access to school board authorities to answer their requests.

They also wonder about the impartiality of the appeal mechanisms, while the councils of commissioners and administrators play the role of both judge and party. That is what has motivated many to request that complaints be processed outside the school boards.

3.5 AVENUES FOR DISCUSSION

Improved school board management requires the implementation of administrative tools for accurately determining expected results and means of achieving them. The satisfactory use of tools for evaluating the results obtained is seen as a necessity. School boards should also be able to fully and clearly account for the accomplishment of their mandate, the achievement of their objectives and the use of the public funds made available to them.

What accounts should school boards be required to render to the government and the general public?

What role should the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport play in a revised school board accountability process?

What role could the Ministère play in accompanying and monitoring school boards in the achievement of expected results?

What mechanisms should be set up to ensure more transparency between school board governing bodies and the public? Should measures be taken to ensure greater harmony between school board strategic plans and school success plans?

Should one or more external agencies be responsible for receiving and processing complaints, along the lines of the commissioners for quality services in the health care sector?

THEME 4

SCHOOL BOARD FUNDING AND SCHOOL TAXATION

School boards are funded by subsidies from the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, school taxes and, to a lesser extent, other sources. Most of the subsidies provided by the Ministère are allocated based on the particular characteristics of each school board. Other allocations are set aside to finance specific needs or the implementation of ministry policies.[3]

Revenues generated by school taxes and equalization grants finance primarily the management of schools, centres and head offices, as well as operating expenditures related to building maintenance and a portion of school transportation. All school boards but seven have achieved the maximum tax rate of $0.35 per $100 of the assessment set by law.

4.1 GOVERNMENT SUBSIDIES

The school boards want the Ministère to give them more autonomy so that they can manage their budgets and implement their orientations and priorities in accordance with regulatory frameworks and ministry policies. They also want the financial leeway to deal with special situations or support local and regional development initiatives.

School boards have considerable leeway in allocating the amounts needed to finance their activities. However, they want more autonomy in this respect and would like the Ministère to reduce the number of targeted measures to the strict minimum in order to provide most of their financing in a priori allocations.

The targeted allocations are intended to provide financial support to broaden the range of services offered to students or to implement ministry policies. Although they did not question the need for these allocations, school boards and school principals pointed out that they cannot be modified to facilitate their implementation given the different regional and local situations. Many of them mentioned that, since what is left of the allocations cannot be used for other purposes, a portion of these resources is not used as effectively as it could to meet students' needs. In addition, they pointed out that managing these allocations is a complicated task and requires time and energy in the schools' and school boards' administrative services. This administrative red tape could be avoided if funding for specific measures were integrated into the general envelopes.

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3. Appendix 4 presents the main characteristics of school board funding.

On the other hand, some participants would like the Ministère to continue granting targeted allocations. They consider that preventing the transfer of these amounts to other budgetary items ensures that the improvements and new services related to these measures are fully supported.

The Fédération québécoise des directions d'établissement d'enseignement recognizes that the method used by the Ministère to distribute allocations is equitable and would like to see school boards apply this principle of equity in allocating school budgets as well. School principals pointed out that school boards do not fully take into account students' needs in their distribution of budgets to the schools. Considering that the schools, along with their governing boards and teachers, are in the best position to identify needs and determine the best ways of meeting them, they ask that the resources allocated to educational services be remitted in full to the schools in an a priori master budget. They would also like school boards to refrain from intervening financially in the school's educational mission.

The school boards proposed that the Ministère establish a three-year plan to finance their activities. This would give them a more stable base for their strategic and operational planning.

Many school boards are asking the Ministère to ensure that the introduction of new measures coincides with their budgetary cycle. In their opinion, this would make it possible to use amounts allocated for the implementation of special measures as soon as possible and to avoid creating artificial budget surpluses in the school boards' financial statements.

4.2 TAXING POWER

Participants were divided into two opposing camps concerning taxing power. Those who want to see school taxes maintained, including the French school boards, make a direct connection between taxing power and school boards' democratic status. Their reasoning is that there is no taxation without representation. However, they believe that the maximum tax level deprives them of the leeway required to meet special needs.

Citing that fact that property taxes are unfair because they do not take into account taxpayers' real ability to pay, those who oppose school taxes say they would prefer to see the school system fully funded by income tax revenues.

Some participants, especially those in the English sector, believe that school board democracy is not necessarily linked to taxing power. Pointing out that more than 80% of school boards' budgets comes from government subsidies, they believe that commissioners can be elected by universal suffrage and mandated to administer the public funds made available to them.

At the administrative level, some English school boards believe that this type of funding is difficult to manage, especially for those whose vast territories are made up of a large number of small municipalities. However, French school boards do not appear to experience the same difficulties.

Municipalities do not want to see the school tax base broadened. They believe that, should the school system have additional needs, the government should provide other sources of funding.

Everyone agrees that, if the government decides to abolish the school tax, it should make sure the school system receives the same level of funding. It should also implement mechanisms to avoid an extra tax burden for citizens.

The French school boards would like to negotiate a five-year renewable tax agreement with the government. This would enable them to review the method of administering the tax and the rules governing tax revenues, and to obtain the financial leeway required to meet their ever-increasing needs.

4.3 AVENUES FOR DISCUSSION

The achievement of student success requires the implementation of a wide range of services. School boards and schools must have the resources they need to guarantee full access to these services throughout their territory. In a context of limited resources, their fair and equitable distribution is essential in ensuring the effectiveness of the school system.

Given the Ministère's responsibilities with respect to the State's basic educational mission, how can we reconcile greater budget autonomy for schools and school boards with the Ministère's desire to see the appropriate resources allocated to the implementation of its policies and programs and the achievement of its objectives?

Should specific expectations be defined with respect to the distribution of budgets by school boards to their schools?

Should the school tax be amended to provide school boards with additional financial leeway?

APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1

MEMBERS OF THE DISCUSSION GROUP AT THE FORUM

Association des cadres scolaires du Québec

Association des commissions scolaires anglophones du Québec

Association des directeurs généraux des commissions scolaires anglophones

Association des directeurs généraux des commissions scolaires

Association montréalaise des directions d'établissement scolaire

Association provinciale des enseignantes et enseignants du Québec

Association québécoise du personnel de direction des écoles

Centrale des syndicats du Québec et Fédération des syndicats de l'enseignement

Commission de l'éducation en langue anglaise

Confédération des syndicats nationaux

Conseil supérieur de l'éducation

Confédération des organismes de personnes handicapées du Québec, Association Québécoise des troubles d'apprentissage et Association du Québec pour l'intégration sociale

Fédération autonome de l'enseignement

Fédération des cégeps

Fédération des chambres de commerce du Québec

Fédération des comités de parents du Québec

Fédération des commissions scolaires du Québec

Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec

Fédération québécoise des associations foyers-écoles

Fédération québécoise des directions d'établissement d'enseignement

Fédération québécoise des municipalités

Institut de coopération pour l'éducation des adultes

Quebec Association for Adult Learning

Quebec Community Groups Network

Union des municipalités du Québec

LIST OF AGENCIES AND SCHOOL BOARDS THAT SUBMITTED A STUDY PAPER ON SCHOOL BOARD DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE

Association des administrateurs des écoles anglaises du Québec

Association des cadres scolaires du Québec

Association des commissions scolaires anglophones du Québec

Association des directeurs généraux des commissions scolaires anglophones

Association des directeurs généraux des commissions scolaires

Association des propriétaires d'autobus du Québec

Association montréalaise des directions d'établissement scolaire

Association québécoise du personnel de direction des écoles

Association québécoise des troubles d'apprentissage

Association du transport écolier du Québec

Centrale des syndicats du Québec

Commission de l'éducation en langue anglaise

Confédération des organismes de personnes handicapées du Québec

Confédération des syndicats nationaux

Conseil des relations interculturelles

Conseil permanent de la jeunesse

Commission scolaire Central Québec

Commission scolaire de la Beauce-Etchemin

Commission scolaire de la Côte-du-Sud

Commission scolaire de la Seigneurie-des-Mille-Îles

Commission scolaire de la Vallée-des-Tisserands

Commission scolaire de Laval

Commission scolaire de l'Énergie

Commission scolaire de l'Or-et-des-Bois

Commission scolaire de Montréal

Commission scolaire de Saint-Hyacinthe

Commission scolaire des Bois-Francs

Commission scolaire des Draveurs

Commission scolaire des Hautes-Rivières

Commission scolaire des Hauts-Cantons

Commission scolaire des Laurentides

Commission scolaire des Navigateurs

Commission scolaire des Patriotes

LIST OF AGENCIES AND SCHOOL BOARDS THAT SUBMITTED A STUDY PAPER ON SCHOOL BOARD DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE

Commission scolaire des Phares

Commission scolaire des Portages-de-l'Outaouais

Commission scolaire des Premières-Seigneuries

Commission scolaire du Chemin-du-Roy

Commission scolaire du Fer

Commission scolaire du Fleuve-et-des-Lacs

Commission scolaire du Lac-Abitibi

Commission scolaire Eastern Townships

Commission scolaire English-Montréal

Commission scolaire Harricana

Commission scolaire Kamouraska-Rivière-du-Loup

Commission scolaire Lester-B.-Pearson

Commission scolaire Marguerite-Bourgeoys

Commission scolaire Marie-Victorin

Commission scolaire New Frontiers

Commission scolaire Pierre-Neveu

Commission scolaire Riverside

Commission scolaire Sir-Wilfrid-Laurier

Commission scolaire de l'Estuaire

Commission scolaire de la Rivière-du-Nord

Conseil supérieur de l'éducation

Fédération des comités de parents du Québec

Fédération des commissions scolaires du Québec

Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec

Fédération québécoise des associations foyers-écoles

Fédération québécoise des directions d'établissement d'enseignement

Fédération québécoise des municipalités

Quebec Association for Adult Learning

Québec Community Groups Network

Regroupement des commissions scolaires de la Montérégie

Regroupement des commissions scolaires de la région du Saguenay–Lac-Saint-Jean

Réseau des carrefours jeunesse-emploi du Québec

Union des municipalités du Québec

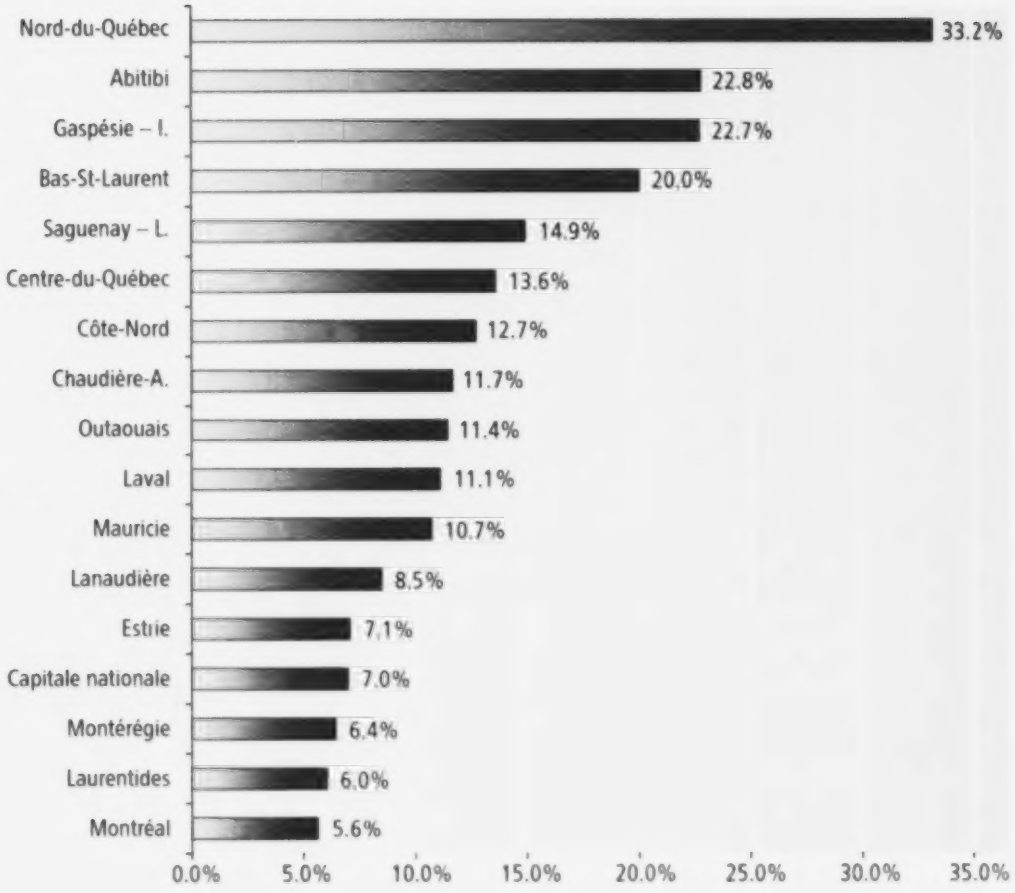
APPENDIX 2

RESULTS OF THE 2003 AND 2007 SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS FOR QUÉBEC AS A WHOLE
(FRENCH AND ENGLISH SCHOOL BOARDS)

		Québec as a whole		French School Boards		English School Boards	
		2007 elections	2003 elections	2007 elections	2003 elections	2007 elections	2003 elections
Total number of districts		1 305	1 311	1 144	1 148	161	163
Number of candidates elected by acclamation	**Total**	879 (67.2%)	913 (69.6%)	778 (68%)	795 (69.3%)	101 (62.7%)	118 (72%)
	Women	426	440	389	404	37	36
	Men	453	473	389	391	64	82
Number of districts in which there were no candidates		13 (1%)	8 (1%)	11 (1%)	4 (1%)	2 (1.2%)	4 (2%)
Number of districts holding elections		413 (31.7%)	396 (30%)	355 (31%)	354 (30%)	58 (36%)	42 (26%)
Number of candidates	**Total**	896	840	769	747	127	93
	Women	383	360-	336	329	45	31
	Men	513	480-	433	418	82	62
Number of recognized electoral teams		18 teams (11 school boards)	12 teams (8 school boards)	16 teams (10 school boards)	11 teams (7 school boards)	2 teams (1 school board)	1 team (1 school board)
Number of voters registered on the voters' lists of the districts holding elections		2 287 454	2 221 890	2 137 269	2 118 095	150 185	103 795
Number of votes cast			187 632		172 436		15 196
Rate of participation			8.4%		8.1%		14.6%

Source: The 2003 and 2007 election results were taken from a compilation produced by the Directeur général des élections and the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport based on information obtained from school board returning officers.

RATE OF PARTICIPATION IN THE 2007 SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS IN FRENCH AND ENGLISH SCHOOL BOARDS, BY ADMINISTRATIVE REGION OF QUÉBEC



Source: Fédération des commissions scolaires du Québec

APPENDIX 4

SCHOOL BOARD FUNDING

School board expenditures fall into two categories: operating expenditures and capital expenditures.

1. OPERATING EXPENDITURES

The two principal sources of financing for operating expenditures are subsidies from the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) (75% of income in 2006-2007) and school taxes (15% of income in 2006-2007).

1.1 MELS SUBSIDIES

The MELS plays an essential role in school board funding in order to ensure universal access to education in Québec regardless of students' socioeconomic status.

The MELS allocates resources to the school boards based on annual budgetary rules. Section 472 of the Education Act stipulates that the Minister shall establish annually and submit to the Conseil du Trésor for approval and to the school boards for consultation, budgetary rules that are drafted in such a way as to provide an equitable apportionment with regard to the allocation of subsidies.

The principles underlying the method of allocating resources are as follows: accountability of school boards thanks to mostly a priori allocations and fully transferable resources; transparency in amendments and the establishment of allocations; and fairness in order to allocate the available resources to each school board based on the nature of services offered, the composition of enrolments and its socioeconomic and geographic situation.

Essentially, these allocations are basic allocations intended to finance teaching and teaching assistance in general education and vocational training in the youth and adult sectors, as well as the organization of these services. These basic allocations are determined according to pre-established parameters based on the number of students declared in the different categories of enrolment.

Additional allocations are also granted for special needs and the implementation of ministry policies.

1.2 SCHOOL TAX

Since 1990-1991, s. 308 of the Education Act has given this definition of the maximum yield of the school tax: a base amount determined for each school board plus the product of an amount per student and the allowable number of students. The number of students, the base amount and the amount per student are defined annually by the government.

The school tax rate is based on the maximum yield of the school tax on the standardized assessment. It may not exceed $0.35 per $100 of the assessment. If the maximum yield of the school tax cannot be met by the income from the school tax (rate multiplied by the standardized assessment), the MELS pays out an equalization subsidy to make up the difference. Right now, seven school boards have not achieved the maximum rate (the five school boards on the Island of Montréal and the Commissions scolaires des Découvreurs and des Laurentides).

In 2007-2008, the school tax formula was revised to mitigate the impact of significant increases in property assessments on taxpayers. The amendments made are as follows: variations in property assessments to be spread out over three years; ceiling on the increase in the average tax bill to match the increase in expenditures financed by the school tax thanks to a freeze on the equalization subsidy making it possible to give taxpayers a tax credit; and the possibility of paying the school tax in two payments if it amounts to $300 or more.

2. CAPITAL EXPENDITURES

The MELS finances more than 70% of capital expenditures; the remainder is usually self-financed by the school boards out of their other income. The MELS grants allocations under the budgetary rules including a basic allocation, additional allocations and specific allocations. The latter two are intended to meet special needs such as extra space for general education in the youth sector and vocational training, building maintenance, and new information and communications technologies. Capital expenditures are financed by the MELS through debt servicing.

APPENDIX 5

A HISTORY OF SCHOOL BOARDS IN QUÉBEC

FROM THE BEGINNING TO THE CREATION OF THE SCHOOL BOARDS

The organization of educational services in Québec is now and always has been an ongoing process that has taken many different forms over the course of history. Under the French regime, the Bishop of Québec was the supreme authority in matters of education, which was provided by religious communities (Ursulines, Séminaire de Québec, etc.), even after 1760. The religious connection was maintained in the initial reforms under the British regime: with the takeover by the Royal Institution in 1801 (the Royal Institution became for all intents and purposes a standing committee for education) the first English Protestant schools were created.

The need for better organization of French schools inspired a number of attempts at reform in the first half of the 19th century. A first attempt in 1824 involving the enactment of the Loi des écoles de fabrique failed because of a lack of financial support from the government. In 1829, the Loi des écoles de syndics provided for subsidized Catholic and Protestant denominational schools with a mechanism for electing directors. Greater emphasis on local control distinguished the next education reform, i.e. the creation in 1841 of a network of schools governed by elected commissioners. However, these commissioners were answerable to the municipal council.

In 1845 school boards became independent of local governance. This reform—which took place at the same time as the enactment of Egerton Ryerson's *School Acts* in Upper Canada—was based on previous legislative achievements and set up school boards as local independent organizations supervised by a public education superintendent.

FROM CONFEDERATION TO THE PARENT REPORT

The 1867 ratification of the British North America Act enshrined two major pillars of school board governance. First, the act founding the Canadian confederation recognized education as an exclusive provincial jurisdiction. From this recognition stemmed the creation in 1868 of the Québec ministry or department of public education. It also ensured the protection of Catholic and Protestant schools. These political and constitutional guidelines were based on the recognition that schools should be rooted in their community and reflect the reality of the members of that community.

The school board governance system adopted after Confederation underwent more changes as a result of reforms fostering the democratization of knowledge. A law enacted in 1943 under Adélard Godbout made school attendance mandatory for all children between the ages of 6 and 14. This major advance was accompanied by the creation by the Godbout and Duplessis governments, between 1940 and 1961, of no fewer than 40 vocational and technical schools, as well as the accelerated construction of schools throughout the province during this period of strong demographic growth.

The Quiet Revolution saw the modernization of Québec's schools. In 1961, the Lesage government set up the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education chaired by Mgr Alphonse-Marie Parent. Its report resulted in the implementation of major reforms, including the creation of the Ministère de l'Éducation and the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation in 1964 and of 64 regional school boards the following year.

TOWARD POPULAR SCHOOL BOARD GOVERNANCE

The government's desire to regionalize services and develop a territorial approach resulted in the reduction of the number of school boards from 1927 in 1948-1949 to 254 in 1971. The 1971 reforms also introduced the principle of universal suffrage in school board elections, illustrating school boards' increasingly important contribution to the community and society in general. The enactment of the Education Act in 1988 accelerated this trend, making school attendance mandatory up until the age of 16, and especially by doing away with the regional school boards and authorizing the creation of school boards along linguistic rather than denominational lines. This measure, which reflected changes in Québec society, required the enactment of a constitutional amendment, which explains why it was implemented only in 1998.

The modernization of school board governance structures in Québec continued with the Estates General on Education in 1996. The purpose of this measure was to bring decision-making closer to the site of action and to give schools more responsibility. At the conclusion of the Estates General, this concern for popular decision-making and identification with social realities led to the creation of governing boards and linguistic school boards and a reduction in the number of school boards to 72, including three with special status.